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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3280  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2666  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BISHKEK 000154

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (GORKOWSKI)

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SUBJECT: KYRGYZ GOVERNMENT TAKES HARD LINE ON NOOKAT "RIOT"

REF: 08 BISHKEK 1135

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Classified By: Ambassador Tatiana C. Gfoeller, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On October 1, 2008, a group of Muslims rioted after local authorities denied their request to celebrate Orozo Ait (Eid al-Fitr) on the central square of Nookat, in Osh Province. The State Committee for National Security subsequently announced on October 13 that 32 members of Hizb ut-Tahrir had been arrested for provoking the disturbance. After a five day trial in November, the accused were sentenced to prison terms ranging from nine to 20 years. Observers criticized the sentences as being overly harsh, and questioned the government's assertion that all of the accused were members of the banned group. Since these events, the government has continued to raise Nookat as a prime exemplar of the threat of Islamic extremism. END SUMMARY

What Happened in Nookat? Day 1

12. (C) On October 1, 2008, local officials denied a request by a group of about 100 Muslims to celebrate Orozo Ait (Eid al-Fitr) on the central square of Nookat, a town with a large ethnic Uzbek population in the southern Osh oblast. Most press accounts say that the group refused the offer of a sports stadium as an alternative, but Aziza Abdurasulova, a human rights activist who had investigated the incident and attended the subsequent trial, told us that the group went to the stadium, found it locked, and then returned to the square. The crowd became angry, and started throwing stones at the local government building. Press accounts from October 1 said that a few windows had been broken, and that no one had been injured. In an interview that day, Abdygany Aliyev, the head of the Nookat district government, said that the organizers of the celebration, who had been denied permission to use the square, were "representatives of recognized religious groups," and that in spite of the rock throwing, the protestors had eventually dispersed peacefully.

What Happened in Nookat? Day 2

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13. (SBU) On October 2, accounts changed of the events of the previous day, with the description becoming more violent. An Interior Ministry press release claimed that the rioting crowd had injured five policemen, broken 41 windows, and damaged two police buses. Media reported that police had to use tear gas to disperse the crowd. On October 4, the Interior Ministry announced that it had arrested seven local residents suspected of organizing the demonstration, and on October 13, the State Committee for National Security announced that authorities had arrested a total of 32 people, all members of the banned extremist Muslim organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, for instigating the disturbance. The President fired Nookat district government head Abdygany Aliyev on October 7.

#### Harsh Sentences for Rioters

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14. (SBU) On November 27, after a five day trial, 32 people who were allegedly involved in the riot were sentenced to prison terms ranging from nine to 20 years. Charges included Article 233 of the Kyrgyz Criminal Code, regarding mass rioting and violence to law enforcement officers, with a maximum charge of ten years; Article 174, regarding premeditated destruction of property, with a maximum sentence of 7 years; Article 234, on "hooliganism," with a maximum sentence of 7 years; and Article 299, inciting religious hatred, with a maximum sentence of 5 years, among others. One individual was found guilty of eight different charges. The Osh regional court of appeals upheld the sentences on 17 January, reducing one prisoner's sentence from 18 to ten

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years. Defense attorneys plan to appeal to the Supreme Court.

15. (SBU) Government prosecutors claimed that all of the accused were members of Islamic extremist group Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is officially banned in the Kyrgyz Republic. Four of the 32 arrestees admitted to being members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, but the remainder denied any affiliation with the group.

16. (C) Observers claimed that the trial had been rushed, and that the verdicts had been overly harsh. Ombudsman Tursunbek Akun told the press: "For these kinds of acts, the accused should have been sentenced to five or six years, not 20." Aziza Abdurasulova, the Director of NGO Kylym Shamy, criticized the trial on several grounds. She told Poloff that the defendants had inadequate legal representation, that the trial had been closed until the third day, and that five days was far too short a time to weigh the guilt of 32 people. She also said that many of the accused made plausible claims that they had not even been at the demonstration, but that the court ignored their statements in reaching its verdict. Nurdin Chydyev, an attorney for two of the accused, said to the press that the prosecutors "should have established who was guilty of incitement, who was just an accomplice and who was an organizer, but this was not presented to the court."

#### Into the Arms of Radical Islam

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17. (C) Beyond the trial's legal shortcomings, Aziza Abdurasulova criticized the government's wider efforts to combat religious extremism. While she believes Hizb ut-Tahrir is anti-constitutional and bad for Kyrgyzstan, her personal experience with Hizb ut-Tahrir members does not lead her to believe that the group is focused on overthrowing the government. She said that many people in the South, particularly young people, are very ignorant, and view Hizb ut-Tahrir as representative of traditional Islam. But instead of explaining to people why Hizb ut-Tahrir is contrary to traditional Islam, the government simply bans it,

and uses it as a pretext to arrest people. She worries that the government's harsh and sweeping response to perceived Islamic radicals, particularly in combination with the new law on religion (see reftel) may push unemployed, disaffected young people into more radical paths.

Remember Nookat

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18. (C) Since the events in Nookat, the government has continued to raise Nookat as a prime exemplar of the threat of Islamic extremism. At a February 12 meeting of the Security Council, President Bakiyev cited the events in Nookat as evidence of the seriousness of Islamic extremist groups' intentions to overthrow the governments of Central Asia by force. Secretary of the State Security Council Adakham Madumarov has repeatedly cited the events at Nookat as a reason for stricter government control of religious organizations and forceful responses to public disorder. He has also complained that Kyrgyzstan's "liberal laws" allow extremist groups too much freedom of movement. According to him, "free and democratic Kyrgyzstan is a good place for terrorist organizations to get stronger."

Comment:

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19. (C) It has been difficult to get an accurate picture of what actually happened in Nookat. Local human rights activists have faced mild harassment (e.g., slashed tires) when they have gone to Nookat to investigate. The Government's portrayal of events appeared to change, perhaps as the extent of the problem became clearer -- or perhaps after the realization that playing up the role of Hizb

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ut-Tahrir in Nookat would be more politically efficacious. In any event, religious extremism is a theme with deep political resonance: In recent meetings with Poloff, a social cross-section of former siloviki, human rights activists, and opposition party members have all expressed worry over the threat posed to Kyrgyzstan by Muslim extremists. It is a theme that often comes up in the Ambassador's conversations with high-level government officials as well.

GFOELLER